

“I Have to Do Something.”

Asma and Taylor

### **“I Have to Do Something.”**

[Right at the end of our first official meeting, Asma and I pulled out our phones to add each other on Facebook. She had a picture she wanted to show me on her profile page.]

A: Okay, so... Come on! [talking to her phone as it loads] I'm going to show you one of the message... This message is... Like I, uh—This message is like, um, “Never, never feel... hopeless. [smoothie blender] Never feel hopeless. No matter what, no matter what is late you dream, one day it will become, one day it will be... there.” Ah, something like that! Let me see first... [laughs] Yeah, “Never feel hopeless,” I know.

T: Yeah.

A: “Never feel hopeless. One day you will be hopeful.” I think that's the message. But it's in Arabic. I don't, I don't see it. [scrolling]

[That quote is more than a Facebook cover photo for Asma, though. It encapsulates this *drive* I saw in her from the moment we met, a boundless sense of determination and hope. She wants to *do* something with her life. And for Asma, that means working *hard*, at everything she does. The following selections speak to Asma's refusal to give up on her dreams.]

A: I used to say to myself, “One day, you will go back to college and graduate.”

T: Yeah.

A: One day, one day, one day. Until now. I become mother, wife—first wife—mother, and...one two three third kids I have now, I just go back to school, and I say, “Don't tell every day, ‘tomorrow’ and ‘tomorrow’ and ‘tomorrow.’ Just start today.”

T: Just start today?

A: Start tod... Yeah.

T: Cool.

A: Yeah... But... You need a hard work.

T: Yeah?

A: You need it. Big challenge. You need to challenge yourself, you need to... You have to work hard to get where you want.

T: Yeah?

A: I think that's the every process you're doing in the life?

T: Mhm.

A: I mean, if you wanna marry, you have to date hardly, and honestly. [laughs]

T: Mhm.

A: You wanna have kids, you have to be a perfect mom. Before becoming mom, you have to be a...take care your pregnancy,

T: Yeah.

A: Eating your vitamins, um...Take care yourself. I mean every process in this life is, is little bit hard.

T: Yeah.

A: But, there, there just, um, um, the difficult is this harder level.

T: Mhm.

A: So, I think it's good, it's the hard, difficult. [laughs] Yeah.

T: Yeah? So...Did you always, did you always know that you had to work hard to get what you wanted in this world?

A: Yes. Always.

T: Or was there like a time when you really remember thinking, "I've really gotta work hard to get here?"

A: No.

T: No. Just always been that way.

A: I always—even when, since I was—I was a kids.

T: Yeah?

A: Um...When I was in high school—I told you, um, I never attended the school for longer—

T: That's right, you were behind, yeah—

A: We used to move, and move, and move, and then I went to school in the middle, middle age, like I didn't start, didn't start for six, uh, six years...

T: Mhm.

A: Where I was young.

T: Right.

A: So I work hard. I challenge myself to learn, a lot of things, like math, science...I learn. I almost eleven years, ten years...

T: Yeah.

A: I learned all this, I never knew before.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah, so...The thing I know only, when I was even young, “You wanna do something? You, you wish to have something, or you wish to be something, work hard.”

T: Yeah.

A: Wake up...Take a nap. Wake up. Study.

T: Yeah.

A: Go to sleep. I mean, your sleep is not gonna be for long. Even if you work? Be the same. Even if you gonna be mom? Be the same. If you’re going to college, it’s gonna be same. High school, it’s gonna be same. You have to work hard to get your grade.

T: Yeah.

A: Um, growing up, life, it was big challenge for me. I always challen—and I-I-I love the challenge.

T: Yeah.

A: Nobody’s gonna push me saying, “Okay, [Asma], go do it. Do this.” Never. My mother, she used to wish to finish high school?

T: Yeah.

A: Um, but she never, um, she never try to push me. She never. She used to...

T: You chose it yourself.

A: Yeah, she, she used to, like to...She love her—all her kids to get education.

T: Mhm.

A: Because she never...went to write and read?

T: Mhm.

A: So, she always telling us, “Okay, you guys girls and I want you to *learn*.”

T: Right.

A: “I don’t care if you learn the religion, or if you learn education. Just, I want you to be, eh, eh, *more than me*. Like, reading, writing, know-how, mathematics. I just—I don’t want you to be the way-the way I was.” I mean, she feel like she, she shouldn’t be like that.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. So, I don’t know. I born like that. I like to challenge myself. Even my husband see me, I’m struggling, he say, “Nobody tell you to do this. You already, you already are, um, full, full-time mom. That’s enough for you.”

T: Yeah.

A: “Why are you making crazy yourself and doing some, another responsibility?”

T: Yeah.

A: “School is very expensive [??]. If you don’t do your job, you cannot be continuing the school.”

T: Mhm.

A: And I say, “I get bored if I don’t do nothing.”

T: Yeah.

A: And he say, “You are doing something. This is not, you don’t do some—nothing. Yeah.”

T: Right. Right.

A: “You’re raising three kids and it’s not easy.” And I say, “I need more.”

T: You need more.

A: Yeah. [pause] Yeah.

T: It’s exciting!

A: [sighs] Yeah. I mean it’s not exciting, it’s very challenging. [laughs]

T: I-I mean, it’s hard, don’t get me wrong, but it’s *exciting*.

A: Yeah. Yeah.

[If the end of that selection says anything, it is that Asma’s hope and optimism is grounded in the practicalities of achieving her dreams. This became even clearer when I asked her about her dreams for the future in a later conversation.]

T: What are your dreams for yourself?

A: My dream is...for the basic, basic, if I start for the basic? My dream is to get a degree...

T: Yeah.

A: ...Or certificate first. To get a job, right now.

T: Right.

A: Being a mom, I used to work warehouse, and now I’m trying to survive first myself.

T: Yeah.

A: And, the second is, my kids and my husband, as soon I get degree.

T: Mhm.

A: I will not let my husband drive truck anymore.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. I will get the *full* responsibility as much I have, I mean, whatever is my income, we're gonna use it to finish his degree.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. We're gonna switch.

T: Yeah.

A: Now, he's trying to raise us, so when I...put in my feet in the floor, I can get a job...

T: Yeah.

A: So I'm I will let him to go finish his degree. My kids, I am...

T: So your dreams for your husband is for him to get his degree.

A: Yes.

T: And to not have to drive a truck anymore.

A: Yes, no, not anymore. It's just for now because we, kinda like the...the kids are very young...

T: Mhm.

A: We just married a few years ago, and the family asking a lot of money for us—

T: Yeah.

A: My family, his family—so he's covering everything.

T: Mhm.

A: The most reason I go to school, it was my dream before and now is...the opportunity I have it. Because now my husband is having income to do, to cover the family, so that make me to use my chance [knocks on table].

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. So, I am so hope, hope, until I get my degree to my husband get healthy for us. Because I'm very worried. If he didn't work, if he cannot work, I cannot go to continue school.

T: Right.

A: So that's my hope right now. And after I get degree, he will get his degree. And my kids, I am wishing to finish high school here.

T: Yeah.

A: And...

[fade]

A: And, yeah. That's my future. After that, after that, after that, if we are alive, if we are safe, [I chuckle] if we are healthy, um, I'm gonna go back to Somalia to do some project. Not, not live there, but doing some project. Helping the college, college, college, um students. Helping—I always love to encourage the young people, I don't know why. Girls...

T: But you would want, you would want to do it *in* Somalia?

A: In Somalia.

T: You feel like that's the place where you need to be encouraging people?

A: I think a lot.

T: Yeah.

A: A lot. When I study, like, back home, and my people, and...What experience I have it? At least I can put there, the thing I have it.

T: Mhm.

A: I mean here in America, there's a lot of people that have a lot experience, more than me. I want to learn about them.

T: Yeah.

A: But...I think the place it work for me—even here, it work for me, it's just to back Somalia.

T: Yeah.

A: So I love to encourage the young, anywhere in this whole, in this whole universe. If I have, eh, enough, I mean, enough education, oh, to share the world?

T: Mhm.

A: I will, I will share—I will write the books, I share everywhere.

T: Mhm.

A: I try to translate any language in this world.

T: Yeah.

A: But...If I'm little bit lower, I'm just....Can help, back home? I don't know, but I love to share.

T: Yeah.

A: And I have to, um, volunteer for um, places who live the elders?

T: Oh, with el—with older people?

A: Older people?

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. And...illness kids.

T: Mhm.

A: Um...kind of like those who need my...my experience. [laughs]

T: Mhm.

A: Not those who don't need me. My experience.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah.

T: That's beautiful.

A: Yeah, yeah thank you. Yeah. I mean, if I look my level, I say, "Okay, there's some who need you, some don't need you." So, I'm-I'm just...

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

T: What is your dream for Somalia?

[pause]

A: [sighs] I don't have a dream for Somalia.

T: You don't have a dream for Somalia?

A: My dream for Somalia, my hope...

T: Mhm.

A: Is Somalia to be safe.

T: For Somalia to be safe? That's it?

A: Yeah. Any—Anything else, it will fix it. For, for, by the time...I mean, everything need time, but after the safe. I mean, if the country is not safe, nothing is gonna be fixed.

T: Yeah.

A: But when the country is safe...Generation after generation, it will be safe.

T: Yeah?

A: It will be, it will be fixed everything. I mean, looking now what happened to Iraq, looking now what happened to Syria, looking now...I mean... Ours is almost thirty years.

T: Yeah.

A: But those, they just starting now. And you see how damaged they have it, a lot.



T: Yeah. Yeah.

A: What do we think of it? Thirty years. [says the words with a quiet force, knocks her knuckle against the table]

T: Yeah.

A: A lot of people, they, the lost their mind, they become crazy, they just walking outside without no clothes, their family putting them in the clothes...

T: Mhm.

A: I mean...Human can lost their brains...They...I mean, I don't know, I'm kind of like a...Emotion person, so softy? So maybe my mom used to worry about me for like that, if I see something bad in a video, I get emotional, I don't know. I mean, I don't know. It's kind of like... [trails off]

T: I do, too.

A: You do, too?

T: You *feel* the world around you very intensely.

A: Yes.

T: I can tell.

A: Yes. Yes. I mean...I'm not wishing any, anyone as this human, get, get *hurt*.

T: Yeah.

A: You're healthy, you're perfect, you're smart, what do you're hating yourself and hating the other people?

T: Mhm.

A: You're supposed to help.

T: Yeah.

A: You're supposed to use your power, those who need it.

T: Yeah.

[pause]

A: Yeah. I mean, yeah. It is what it is, but...yeah. Yeah, that's why I'm trying to encourage for the young people not to use the bad way for this life.

T: Mhm.

A: They just use the good way.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. If I get a chance to write a book? I don't care how many pages. I don't care if it's just a, uh, hundred pages, fifty pages.

T: Yeah.

A: I have to do something. [knocks on table]

T: Yeah.

A: At least maybe one person survive, writing, reading my book.

T: [murmurs] You want just one person...

A: I am so happy.

T: Yeah.

A: I mean, if one person survive from my book and get that idea, and use the power they have it? I'm very happy for that. Yeah. I used, I used to read a lot of books when I was in, back in Somalia...

T: Yeah.

A: In Syria, Arabic books.

T: Yeah.

A: Beautiful stories. I mean not the beautiful—some story are very bad, some story are very good, some story are very *powerful*—and you say, “That person is just a human like me, I can do it, too.”

[Asma has a few different ideas for how she can help, including becoming an educator, which we shared before. But it is this curiosity about writing a book that continues to come up in conversation.]

A: After I come United States, I *always* think about to write my story. I think I told you before...

T: You want to write a book.

A: I *always* interested to write a book. But when I go back, I say, “How is gonna be? Writing book? And you don't even know what language it's gonna be published.”

T: Yeah.

A: So... Yeah. Maybe. I don't know, I feel like myself I'm interested for these stories, coming to the other countries, people who—they're not their homes, they're suffering for other countries, I don't know, I'm just like, “Hm. Maybe medical school is not good for me. Maybe it's good for me, good the work. Maybe you can be another thing...” It's just my mind is... I will see after I finish all my general...

T: Gen-general eds? Yeah? Gen-eds? Is that what it's called?

A: General—no, um, uh...um... Ah. General classes?

T: Yeah?

A: For the basic ones. Like English...

T: The general ones.

A: Yeah. The general ones. After that I'll see what I will be.

[Because although working as an ultrasound technician is something Asma can see herself doing, it is writing that plays a more important role in her daily life. A bit of a warning—this selection comes from our first conversation about writing, and my excitement as a writer encountering another member of her species comes out with quite a bit of gusto.]

A: [kitchen noises] I write, when I have a, a sad emotion, I write—

T: You write?

A: Write, yes.

T: Do you journal?

A: Ummm, I cannot say journal, one book, but...couple books, couple books.

T: Do you—

A: Any book I see, I—

T: You just write in the margins?

A: Just to feel, to feel a feel better. Some I write in is at home. Some I write it in English, even!

T: Yeah?

A: I know I cannot write English very good, but I write the way I say. [laughs]

T: Yeah.

A: I write the way I feel!

T: Yeah. Do you save—so do you have them saved?

A: Yeah, yeah, some I... Because I, when I moved my old house?

T: Yeah.

A: For, uh, last month?

T: Yeah?

A: I find that surprisingly some books I write in something and I didn't know!

T: Yeah.

A: And even the day I write it is here!

T: Yeah.

A: I can show you!

T: Yeah!

A: You can—you can take a picture and put it there.

T: Would you mind? [spoken so earnestly, I can feel the words echoing in my lungs now]

A: Yes, yes, I don't mind, I don't mind if you take a picture. Yeah.

T: Okay, cool! [A laughs...likely at my eager puppy dog excitement] So you're a writer! You're a writer.

A: Yes, sometimes I am, I think I am crazy because you know what?

T: It's not crazy!

A: I didn't get the chance to go back to college early?

T: Yeah.

A: I didn't get that chance—because I was wishing, but I didn't get it, but sometimes I think to myself, like, “Why don't you become writer and make a book and write stories?” And sometimes I ask myself, “Why you don't become, ah, um, eh... Why don't be, eh, get a degree, educated? Education and then go back to Somalia and teach those, help those who don't understand... The kids... Mommies... Women who never studied, never go to school, give them, eh, eh, give them *energy*, tell them, “You can do it.”

T: Yeah.

A: “You can learn ABC's today.”

[However, Asma has also considered teaching beyond the pages of a book. She also dreams of becoming a teacher or educator of some kind.]

A: Sometime, I dream, like I want to finish college, educated, and help those mothers—they don't know how to work with their kids.

T: Yeah.

A: Sometime, I, I *dream* like that.

T: Yeah?

A: Why don't I tell the mothers like me, those are young mothers like me, those you have the young kids but they don't know how to, how to raise, because when I open the computer, I learn new tools, I learn how to read the story with my kids, I don't have those ideas when I'm back home, I don't have it.

T: Right.

A: When I come here, I learn a lot. Those who put in the computer have a lot of tools, that's like. Mothers like us...

T: Yeah.

A: And fathers like us.

T: Yeah.

A: Fathers who gives us tools how to raise a mommy a kids He find himself how to study, so he give us free tools.

T: Right.

A: So why I don't do that, why, I ask myself, why don't be this world something important.

T: Yeah.

[fade]

A: I—Sometimes, my ideas—“Why don't you tell those mommies who never understand they have a hopeless, but they're young age, why don't you tell them, “You can *learn*.”

T: Yeah.

A: Now, you can learn. Open the schools and tell them—*all* the adults to come down to school, to learn... They can do everything they want in this life, they can change everything, as long as they have a feeling to go to school.

T: Yeah.

A: So why don't you help those kids? They're feeling like hopeless, no one can read—no one can send them to school, um, buy them books and buy them pencils, um, something like that. I have crazy ideas, but sometimes I say, like, “You don't have all that power. You don't have all that...” [laughs, watching me write] Sorry.

T: It's okay.

A: It's just like...

T: I'm writing that down.

A: Yeah. But... That's my wishes. I, I, I get the hope, but I want to put it back, I want to give them back. So... Sometimes, I see myself write the books, for these, these stories, nice stories, give them, give women a chance to feel eh powerfuls. Yeah, kind of like... A lot of ideas come into my mind, and it's gone, and come, and it's gone, and it's like... I'm not doing nothing,

T: If you think...

A: I just... [high, breathy laugh]

[Her desire, then, no matter what she does, is to help empower women and children to seek their own futures. To take their own chances. Like she did.]

A: Yeah. Just let, just give them a chance for someone, somewhere else.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

T: So that's your dream for the world?

A: Yes.

T: Yeah?

A: I think—I think I'm the one of them.

T: Yeah?

A: I *am* the one of them...This chance...My mother didn't give it to me. This challenge, my dad didn't give it to me. Just...*chance*, someone else work hard and volunteer give it to me. Even if you have an idea and you put in the table [knocks on table], it's that volunteer. That's the volunteer. Yeah. I'm a—I'm a one of the survivor, those.

T: Yeah.

A: I was like that, yeah. [pause] When I was seventeen, I was a kids. I—I did not have a future, I was not have a life. I couldn't go back to my mom because she, I mean if maybe I don't have another chance, maybe I will go back to my mom and see and stay there if I lost hope for, for the refugee office.

T: Yeah.

A: But...Going back to Somalia, like, I give up.

T: Yeah.

A: There was no future.

T: Yeah.

A: There was no future.

[The previous selection embraces the duality of hope and struggle, of aspiration and difficulty, in Asma's life. Despite it all, though, Asma continues to fight. "Fighter" was another word I asked her to define for me in a later conversation. In fact, it was the last word.]

T: All right. One more word.

A: Okay.

T: "Fighter."

A: Yeah. I fight until I get the things I wanted.

T: You fight until you get the things you want.

A: Mhm.

T: So you're a fighter?

A: Yeah. It doesn't matter how long it take me. It doesn't matter how long it drive me. But...Sometime I forg—I give up a little bit?

T: Mhm.

A: But then my mind is still thinking. So...I may slow down a little bit, but I will go back. And do it again. [pause] Yeah. [pause]

T: Were you always a fighter?

A: Um...always? [pause] No. After I left my mom.

T: That's when you became a fighter?

A: Yeah. I learned—After I left my mom, I learned...how to get...the things I needed on my own.

T: Yeah.

A: My own way. Like...If I didn't work hardly, if I didn't want that thing continue, no one is gonna give me. So there is no more protecting. Only me.

T: Yeah.

A: So my mom is not there—

T: —So you had to fight for yourself—

A: Yeah, so I have to defend myself. I have to fight for what I wanted. If I want to work, if I want a job, if I want a car—if I wanna do a lot of things, take me so much process. And you know, when you're taking step for to other places—processes, and your mind is not easy how to work with it.

T: Mhm.

A: So I started...fighting to get anything I needed.

T: And you're still fighting.

A: I'm trying, [laughs] but...As much you getting older, it's like you're giving up little bit, little bit, so...You will see it when you grow up. [quiet, breathy laugh. Like she knows she's sharing a heavy truth]

[According to Asma, growing older—and all the responsibilities that entails—requires a kind of shift. She sees it as a weakening, a loosening of resolve. But I, in all my naïve, youthful optimism, continue to find persistence and determination in her actions.]

A: I, I always used to try do the good things for the people.

T: Mhm.

A: And for the people, to apologize. To clean myself.

T: Mhm.

A: Um, to start to do good things. And to leave the bad things even if they want to come to me.

T: Mhm.

A: Just...live.

T: Yeah.

A: I know, when... When you can be a champion is by the time you're growing up.

T: Yeah.

A: After you're thirty years, you're gonna be busy, the life will change.

T: Yeah.

A: But you can be champion in the middle of that—fourteen to thirty years old.

T: Yeah.

A: That's the perfect age, I love it. Yeah. So now I'm thirty, my dream is very old [laughs] yesterday.

T: But it sounds like... It sounds like you are... [pause] You're still working to do the same thing.

A: Yeah. But it's, it's...

T: It sounds like you could still—it's harder—

A: It's harder, and, and also—

T: —But that doesn't keep you from doing it.

[And so Asma will keep fighting, pursuing her dreams. She will continue to fight for her mother, her sister, her family, her country, and her future. But before I make this out to be some grandiose adventure that feels more like a story and less like a life, it is important to remember the little steps and goals Asma is working for.]

A: In this college—Ohio Technical College—I *wish*, my wish today, and this year, [2018], my wish—the day I will graduate, my mom to be my side. That's my wish. To come *before*, the day



I graduate on the stage, I want my mom to be on my side. If-if-if it doesn't happen... It's not—I get a degree, still I feel that something is wrong. Something is... is missing.

T: Is missing.

A: In my, in my life. Yeah.

[Because each success—each dream—builds on the next.]